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The Medical College of Georgia Project

Submitted by Robert L. Blakely, Georgia State University

In 1989, Robert Blakely (Georgia State University) and Chad Braley (Southeastern Archaeological Services) directed salvage archaeology in the earthen floor of the basement of the Medical College of Georgia (MCG) in Augusta, Georgia. The team recovered human bones representing hundreds of cadaver parts -- arms, legs, torsos, skulls. Many of the bones show signs of postmortem dissection and amputation. Others had been autopsied, and a few had specimen numbers written on them with India ink. The remains include African Americans and Euro-Americans, both sexes, and all ages from fetus to the elderly. Also recovered were hundreds of artifacts, including scalpels, syringes, thermometers, microscope slides, coins, clothing, coffin lining, nonhuman animal bones, and medicine bottles. Some bottles contain residue of their original contents; one holds liquid preserving human organ tissue.

Because dissection was illegal in Georgia until 1887, the procurement of cadavers had to be carried out surreptitiously. Grave robbers, or "resurrectionmen" as they are sometimes known, were employed by the college to rob corpses from their graves in nearby cemeteries. Bodies also were provided by local hospitals. Much of the dissected material was discarded in the basement of the college building.

With funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities and Georgia State University, Blakely and his students are conducting studies to learn (1) the preferences of anatomy professors in the procurement of cadavers, (2) the social attitudes and medical knowledge of the college physicians, and (3) other activities carried out at the college in the 1800s.

Throughout the project, we have attempted to minimize researcher bias in three ways: (1) by drawing upon evidence from a wide array of sources, including forensic anthropology, archaeology, experimental anatomy, history and ethnography; (2) by involving both African-American and Euro-American scholars in all levels and components of the research; and (3) by engaging residents of Augusta in the processes of discovery and interpretation.

A comparison of demographic data from the skeletal remains with census figures from nineteenth-century Augusta showed that MCG's professors preferred as cadavers African Americans over Euro-Americans, males over females, and adults over children. Given the prevailing social attitudes and economic realities of the day, these findings are not unexpected. Today, with legal dissection and body donor programs, the preponderance of cadavers are Euro-American.

By replicating nineteenth century dissection techniques on modern cadavers, the investigators found that dissection in the last century was more comprehensive than it is today. This change largely reflects two factors: (1) the specialized course work and medical practices of today leave far less time for training in gross anatomy than in the past; (2) much of anatomical dissection in the nineteenth century entailed practice amputations, a treatment that was quick, if not always efficacious.

The analysis of artifacts revealed that the MCG building was more than a teaching facility during the last century. Bottles containing medicinals such as cod liver oil indicate that there was a dispensary on the premises for administering to patients. Cod liver oil used to be a common treatment for "consumption" (tuberculosis).

To its credit, the Medical College of Georgia has not tried to keep alive on a potentially embarrassing and painful aspect of its past. The bones eventually will be returned to Augusta for reinterment, and the artifacts will form part of a museum exhibit to chronicle the history of MCG, nineteenth-century medical practices, and the decedents who unknowingly gave themselves to science -- not once, but twice.